

August 2021

## American Rescue Plan Act's Education Funds Can Address Inequity in West Virginia's Public Schools

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### Introduction

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provides states with assistance and broad economic relief as the nation recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Act also includes \$123 billion in new, flexible funding known as the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSERF) for school districts that they can spend over the next three and a half school years — the largest ever one-time federal investment in K-12 education. West Virginia schools will receive \$761.9 million to ensure that they can reopen safely and meet students' educational needs.

Federal rules specifically require 20 percent of the funds be used to address the academic losses students experienced in connection to COVID-19's impact on instruction and learning time. The funds may be used to mitigate a multitude of issues sparked or exacerbated by the pandemic, including through paying for upgrades to school facilities, academic support programs, technology enhancements, student social and emotional health supports, and additional teachers and staff. The federal rules also require activities and interventions that “respond to students' academic, social, and emotional needs and address the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on underrepresented student subgroups, including each major racial and ethnic group, children from low-income families, children with disabilities, English learners, gender, migrant students, students experiencing homelessness, and children and youth in foster care.”<sup>1</sup>

The majority of the funds will go to local school boards that will make critical decisions on how to use the money; however, the local decision-making bodies must receive public input from educators and parents on their proposed plans. This represents a significant opportunity for West Virginia to address some of the longstanding needs and challenges in its education system.

### West Virginia's Education Landscape

One of the biggest challenges schools face in response to the pandemic is making up for lost learning time. Over the past year, students lost critical in-person learning time as the pandemic forced schools to close. Further, virtual and distant learning options were limited and have not worked well for all children. This learning loss could have a long-term impact on student achievement and could exacerbate longstanding disparities in educational outcomes between white students and students of color.<sup>2</sup> But even before the pandemic, schools and students in West Virginia struggled.

### School Spending and Teacher Pay

In 2019, West Virginia ranked 28th nationally in per pupil education spending, spending \$12,010 per student — \$1,200 less than the national average. West Virginia spends less per pupil than the national average in most categories, including instruction salaries (ranked 36th), pupil support (ranked 36th), instructional staff support (ranked 41st), general administration (ranked 37th), and school administration (ranked 33rd).<sup>3</sup>

1 “U.S. Department of Education Fact Sheet: American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER),” [https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL\\_ARP-ESSER-FACT-SHEET.pdf](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL_ARP-ESSER-FACT-SHEET.pdf).

2 Eric A Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, “The Economic Impacts of Learning Losses,” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, September 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/education/The-economic-impacts-of-coronavirus-covid-19-learning-losses.pdf>.

3 U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 Public Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Data.

West Virginia has struggled to recruit and retain the necessary number of teachers to provide instruction to students. This could be somewhat attributable to the state’s rural nature, as counties in rural areas are more likely to struggle to fill classrooms with certified teachers each year. However, relatively low pay for teachers is also a significant factor.

In West Virginia, the average teacher salary for the 2020-2021 school year was \$50,238, ranking 48th among the 50 states and D.C., nearly \$14,000 below the national average. The average starting salary for teachers in West Virginia is also low, at \$37,978, ranking 36th in the nation.<sup>4</sup>

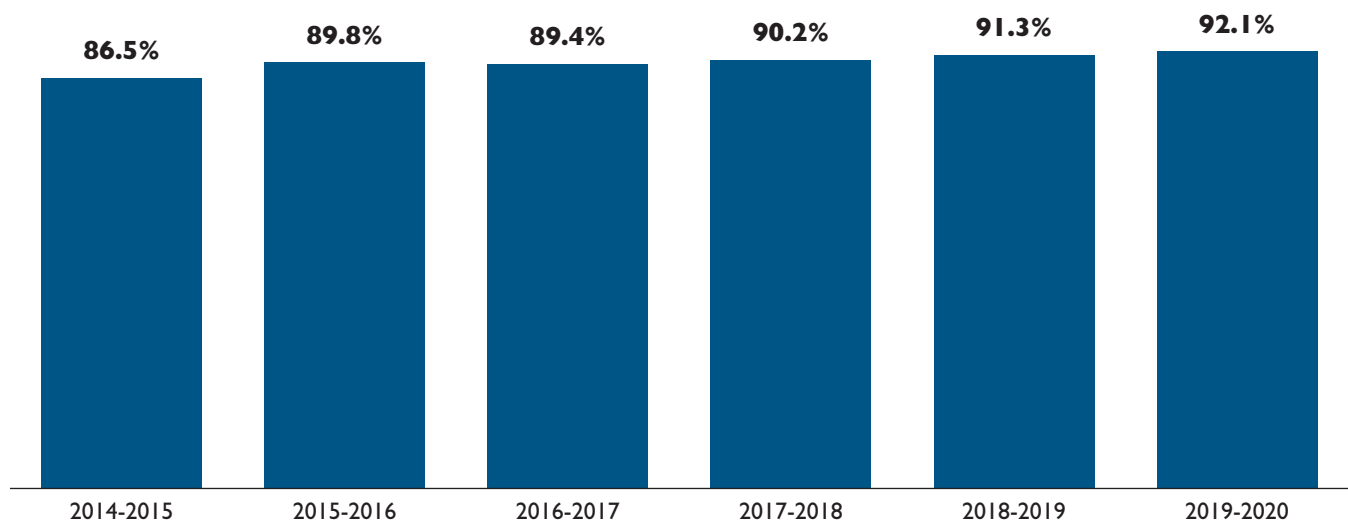
### Student Performance

According to statewide assessment averages for the 2018-2019 school year, only 44 percent of 3rd graders were proficient in reading and only 51 percent were proficient in math.<sup>5</sup> Among 11th graders, the proficiency rates were 52 percent for reading and 24 percent for math.<sup>6</sup> While statewide proficiency rates are low, they vary greatly by county, with some counties’ rates being far lower than the state average. For example, in McDowell County, the 3rd grade reading proficiency rate was 36 percent and the math proficiency rate was 40 percent. In 11th grade, the proficiency rates for the county were 37 percent for reading and 7 percent for math.<sup>7</sup> This is a stark contrast to the same data for Monongalia County, where the 3rd grade reading proficiency rate was 56 percent, and the 3rd grade math proficiency rate was 65 percent. The Monongalia County 11th grade reading proficiency rate was 64 percent, and the math proficiency rate was 42 percent.<sup>8</sup>

While the state’s proficiency rates are low, the state’s graduation rate has been increasing. Since 2015, the state’s graduation rate has increased from 86.5 percent to 92.1 percent (**Figure 1**). However, the graduation rate could decline if school closures and other COVID-related challenges increase the drop-out rates.

FIGURE 1

### West Virginia’s High School Graduation Rate Increasing West Virginia 4-year high school graduation rates, 2015–2020



**Source:** West Virginia Department of Education, Zoom Data, Data Profile for All Districts, downloaded <https://zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/2111>

4 National Education Association, “Rankings of the States 2020 and Estimates of School Statistics 2021” (April, 2021).

5 West Virginia Department of Education, Zoom Data, Data Profile for All Districts, 2018-2019, downloaded <https://zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/7301>.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

## Poverty

West Virginia is an historically poor state with high levels of poverty. In 2019, the state's median household income was \$48,850, the second lowest among the 50 states and nearly \$17,000 below the national average. West Virginia also had the sixth highest poverty rate among all states, with a rate of 16 percent, 3.7 percentage points higher than the national average. West Virginia's child poverty rate is even higher, with 19.6 percent of the state's children living in poverty. Poverty is an even more serious problem for Black West Virginians, who have a poverty rate of 26.9 percent.<sup>9</sup>

The high levels of poverty and low household incomes among West Virginia's children have a profound impact on the school system, creating challenges to student achievement. Of the 252,357 students enrolled in West Virginia's public school system, nearly half (120,927) qualified as low socioeconomic status (SES) students.<sup>10</sup> Black and Hispanic students are even more likely to qualify as low SES students, with 70 percent of Black students and 55 percent of Hispanic students qualifying. In addition, 62 percent of multiracial students are considered low SES students (Figure 2).

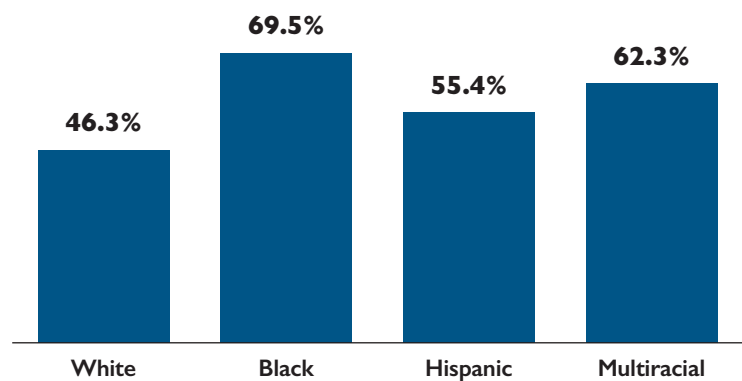
Studies show that there is a strong correlation between students' socioeconomic status and their educational outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Poverty creates significant barriers to learning that prevent students from reaching their full potential in schools. The symptoms of poverty put undue stress on students, making it harder for them to learn. Students living in poverty may also have fewer resources to complete homework, study, or participate in activities that would enhance their ability to learn.<sup>12</sup> Parents of these students may have to work long hours or multiple jobs, thus reducing the amount of time they have to monitor or assist with their children's schoolwork.<sup>13</sup>

## Racial Disparities

Longstanding systemic inequities have resulted in large disparities in income and poverty between Black and white families in West Virginia. Black West Virginians are almost twice as likely to be living in poverty than white West Virginians and Black households have only 70 percent of the income of white households. Black men and women face higher unemployment rates and lower wages than their white counterparts.<sup>14</sup>

And these disparities also persist in education. When looking at the differences in academic and other outcomes between Black and white students, the term "achievement gap" could be more accurately described as an opportunity gap.<sup>15</sup> Black students' achievement levels would increase if the socioeconomic opportunities available to middle-class white students were available to all students.<sup>16</sup>

FIGURE 2  
**Nearly Half of West Virginia's Students Qualify as Low Socioeconomic Status Students**  
Percentage of low socioeconomic status students, by race, 2020-2021



**Source:** West Virginia Department of Education, Zoom Data, Data Profile for All Districts, downloaded from <https://zoom-wv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/2056>

9 U.S. Census Bureau, 2019 American Community Survey.

10 West Virginia Department of Education, ZoomWV: 2020-2021, downloaded from <https://zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/2056>.

11 Richard J. Coley and Bruce Baker, "Poverty and Education: Finding the Way Forward," (Princeton, NJ, Educational Testing Service, July 2013).

12 Eric Jensen, "How Poverty Affects Classroom Engagement," (ASCD, May 2013).

13 Mercedes Ekono, Yang Jiang, Sheila Smith, "Young Children in Deep Poverty," (New York, National Center for Children in Poverty, January 2016).

14 Sean O'Leary, "The State of Working West Virginia 2020: The State of Racial Inequality," (West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, November 2020).

15 Alfinio Flores, "Examining Disparities in Mathematics Education: Achievement Gap or Opportunity Gap?" *The High School Journal*, 91, no. 1 (November 2007).

16 Linda Darling-Hammond, "Unequal Opportunity: Race and Education," (Brookings Institute, March 1998).

## Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation

Black students nationwide are more likely than students of other races to attend schools with unequal access to key educational resources such as quality curriculum and highly qualified teachers.<sup>17</sup> In West Virginia, this opportunity disparity is evident in graduation rates. For the 2019-2020 school year, the four-year graduation rate for Black students was 86.1 percent, compared to 92.4 percent for white students.<sup>18</sup> This gap in graduation rates leads to disparities in college attendance and degree attainment, as Black students who have not attended schools that have adequately prepared them for post-secondary education will not have an equitable chance at success in college. Nationwide, only around 22 percent of Black Americans hold at least a bachelor's degree, compared to around 36 percent of white Americans.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to being underrepresented in graduation rates, Black students are underrepresented in “gifted” programs and advanced placement (AP) courses. Meanwhile, they are overrepresented in areas of schooling such as discipline, expulsion, and special education. In West Virginia, Black students make up five percent of the state's student population, but made up 11 percent of suspensions and eight percent of expulsions during the 2012 academic year.<sup>20</sup> While white students are more likely to be suspended for offenses like smoking or vandalism — actions that can be tangibly proven — Black students are more likely to be suspended for subjective reasons such as loitering or disrespect.<sup>21</sup> Disciplinary methods are often applied disparately in schools, and those methods that remove Black students from the classroom interrupt instructional time, further widening opportunity gaps.<sup>22</sup> The reasons for these racial disparities in application are rooted in racism, implicit bias, and adultification.

Black students are referred to special education programs at higher rates than white students. For the 2020-2021 school year, 18 percent of white students, 20 percent of Black students, 16 percent of Hispanic or Latino students, and 17 percent of multi-racial students participated in special education programs in West Virginia.<sup>23</sup>

And while Black students are more likely to be referred to special education programs, they are less likely to be in a “gifted” program. Gifted programs allow students who are talented in reading and/or math to receive additional material intended to challenge them, as well as additional support. Teachers and/or parents can refer students to the program, but certain criteria must be met for a student to gain access to testing and admission.<sup>24</sup> Nationwide, Black students make up 15 percent of the overall student population, but they comprise only 9 percent of the gifted education program. Admission to these programs requires observation of skills that could be considered subjectively and allow implicit biases to affect outcome. For example, the question of whether a student “is curious; tends to ask ‘how’ and ‘why’ often” is a required observation, but behavior that may be viewed as curious in white children can be deemed as confrontational in Black children.<sup>25</sup>

## Structural Racism and Implicit Bias

While income and poverty disparities help explain some of the racial education disparities in West Virginia, the assumption that social class truncates racial issues is a longstanding debate that seeks to silence claims of structural racism. The systems and structures that guide our society are not neutral, and it will take intentional effort to shift these systems to benefit everyone.<sup>26</sup> This includes understanding when a system such as education is embedded with inequities that prevent students from flourishing.

17 Linda Darling-Hammond, “Unequal Opportunity: Race and Education,” (Brookings Institute, March 1998).

18 West Virginia Department of Education, ZoomWV: 2020-2021, downloaded from <https://zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/2056>.

19 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health, Profile: Black/African Americans, downloaded from <https://www.minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=61>.

20 University of Pennsylvania Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, “Disproportionate impact of K-12 suspension and expulsion on Black students in southern states,” (August 2015).

21 Ryan Quinn, “State Education Officials Pledge to Reduce Discipline Disparity Between Black, White Students,” Charleston Gazette-Mail, February 20, 2021.

22 Edward J. Smith and Shaun R. Harper, “Disproportionate Impact of K-12 School Suspension and Expulsion on Black Students in Southern States” (Penn Graduate School of Education, Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, 2015).

23 West Virginia Department of Education, ZoomWV: 2020-2021, downloaded from <https://zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/2056>.

24 West Virginia State Department of Education, Gifted, downloaded from <https://wvde.us/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/GiftedFactSheet11-2017.pdf>.

25 Danielle Dreilinger, “America's Gifted Education Programs Have a Race Problem. Can It Be Fixed?” NBC News, October 14, 2020.

26 John A. Powell, “Deepening Our Understanding of Structural Marginalization,” *Poverty & Race*, 22 no. 5 (September/October 2013).

The term “implicit bias” is used to describe “when we have attitudes towards people or associate stereotypes with them without our conscious knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> In West Virginia, there are communities that do not have Black members, leading to a lack of representation of real Black experiences. As such, people in these communities may have to rely primarily on media representations and secondhand accounts of Blackness. Black students may attend schools where they are the only Black student in their class or grade and implicit bias can negatively impact how they are viewed by their teachers and other students.

## COVID-19’s Impact on Schools

On March 13, 2020, all of West Virginia’s school facilities were closed due to the threat of COVID-19 spread. Counties switched to remote learning while still recognizing the public school system’s critical role in addressing basic needs like feeding students. This resulted in statewide and grassroots efforts to supply students with meals through bus route drop-offs or drive through distribution sites in communities. In larger counties such as Monongalia County, students were issued laptops or other technology aids and classes resumed in a virtual format. Meanwhile, in some other counties, a lack of widespread internet service restricted schools to distributing paper packets through bus routes and parent pick-ups. These varied challenges speak to the individualized needs of students and communities and the diversity of roles that teachers and school service personnel are called upon to play.

Teachers and schools had to pivot quickly to create virtual learning environments. Their efforts resulted in the creation of virtual classrooms that allowed students direct access to teacher-led instruction. However, not all students were able to access the internet at the same rates.<sup>28</sup>

And while schools are sites of learning, they also functionally serve as daytime child care. The switch to remote learning required students to learn at home, but it also called for an adult to stay home with their child to assist with learning. This created challenges for parents who faced the dilemma of choosing between working a job or helping with their child’s remote learning.<sup>29</sup>

In-person instruction began again on January 19, 2021. The U.S. Department of Education waived state assessments for the 2019-2020 school year. However, a remote option remained a choice for students. This year’s assessments will give better insight into the academic losses sustained due to school closures and remote learning. Students of color were more susceptible to academic losses due to a variety of factors, including the probability of parents having to work outside of the home and thus being less available to help with remote learning, as well as less access to additional resources that support learning such as stable internet and teacher-led instruction.<sup>30</sup>

According to preliminary research for the 2020-2021 school year, “students of color were about three to five months behind in learning; white students were about one to three months behind.” This gap may widen to students of color being

### A Look into Life During Remote Learning

One parent interviewed for this issue brief described her daughter’s typical day beginning with logging into a virtual class meeting in the morning. After the morning meeting, this mother had to help her 2nd grader navigate how to access the assignments that were posted online. She had to read and navigate the instructions while also guiding her child to the correct answers. There were usually live meetings that had to be attended for music, art, and PE classes depending on the day. This parent’s main concern was the lack of access to the reading specialist that her child normally would have met with consistently in person. The nature of internet connectivity issues on the school’s side and at home led to fewer meaningful interactions with this specialist.

27 Perception Institute, “Implicit Bias,” <https://perception.org/research/implicit-bias/>.

28 Kris Maher, “Remote Schooling Out of Reach for Many Students in West Virginia Without Internet,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2020.

29 Ruth Igielnik, “A Rising Share of Working Parents in the U.S. Say It’s Been Difficult to Handle Child Care During the Pandemic,” *Pew Research Center*, January 26, 2021.

30 Richard Rothstein, “The Coronavirus Will Explode Achievement Gaps in Education,” (Economic Policy Institute, April 14, 2020).



six to 12 months behind as compared to white students who may be four to eight months behind if learning losses are not specifically addressed.<sup>31</sup>

## **Policy Recommendations for Utilizing ARPA Education Funding to Increase Equity**

The educational funding West Virginia's school districts will receive from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) represents an historic opportunity to address longstanding inequities in public education. Black students have long been disenfranchised in America's public education system, nationally and in West Virginia. The disparities that confront Black people are rooted in anti-Black racism that permeates systems and creates inequities in economic mobility.<sup>32</sup> This has led to reduced opportunities to access higher education, employment, income, and wealth, and the pandemic has created an even larger wealth gap between Black and white families.<sup>33</sup>

Schools have long acted as a force for assimilation rather than as sites of support for cultural differences and experiences. The opportunity gap could be addressed by including culturally responsive instruction in which the knowledge and experiences students share with communities, families, and peers is valued. This would also include teachers understanding and respecting cultural differences and using them as learning resources to reach students in meaningful and valuable ways.<sup>34</sup> While West Virginia has a mostly homogenous, white population, the state has 10,322 Black students<sup>35</sup> whose learning needs and well-being must be valued. Creating an equitable educational landscape benefits West Virginia as a whole by creating opportunities for all students.

### **Prioritize Public Input**

Plans for ARPA funding must meet the approval guidelines set forth by the federal government. The West Virginia Department of Education has created an in-person presentation process for school districts to submit and explain their plans. Districts must return to their communities after these presentations and make their plans available for public comment, although this could be as simple as placing the plan on the county's website.

School districts should actively seek to gather input from parents and teachers in the community on their needs and experiences, particularly from those who may have suffered larger academic losses during the pandemic's school closures and shift to remote learning. Without specifically seeking out the insight of families who have suffered disproportionately large impacts of learning loss from the pandemic, school officials will miss critical input that could result in marginalized students falling even further behind.

The public input collection process should also include a method of providing input that does not require internet service since internet access has long been recognized as an issue in the state, especially in more rural areas. Low-income parents are also less likely to provide input for a number of reasons, including heavy workloads that require most of their attention and energy. Schools could use robocalls, text messages, and mailers to alert parents about the existence of the surveys. They could also continue to collect this information over the next three years in the attempt to survey the effectiveness of the implemented aspects of the state-approved plans.

### **Address Root Causes of Disparities**

When developing and executing plans for ARPA funding, school districts should prioritize solutions that address the root causes of academic inconsistencies, including the learning difficulties created by poverty. West Virginia's schools and communities immediately recognized some of these challenges when the pandemic began, quickly funneling resources into feeding students when schools closed. Creative ways to continue meeting students'

31 Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg, "COVID-19 and Learning Loss — Disparities Grow and Students Need Help," (McKinsey & Company, December 2020).

32 "U.S. Department of Education Fact Sheet: American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ARP ESSER)," [https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL\\_ARP-ESSER-FACT-SHEET.pdf](https://oese.ed.gov/files/2021/03/FINAL_ARP-ESSER-FACT-SHEET.pdf).

33 Christian E. Weller and Richard Figueroa, "Wealth Matters: The Black-White Wealth Gap Before and During the Pandemic," (Center for American Progress, July 28, 2021).

34 The Education Alliance, Brown University, Culturally Responsive Teaching, downloaded from <https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/teaching-diverse-learners/strategies-0/culturally-responsive-teaching-0>.

35 West Virginia Department of Education, ZoomWV: 2020-2021, downloaded from <https://zoomwv.k12.wv.us/Dashboard/dashboard/2056>.

physical needs will be needed to recover academic losses. The ARPA guidance states that wraparound services and the needs of students from low-income families can be met with the funds.<sup>36</sup> School districts could look to meet the needs of students outside of traditional school hours by working in conjunction with community partners for long-term support.

Further, the services that schools and food access groups provided to ensure that students were given three meals a day can continue to exist to help alleviate food insecurity. Services can also be made available to address students' needs for access to technology, one-on-one tutoring, counselors, and therapists. Additionally, direct support to guide parents in their journey to help their students learn could be provided in the form of parental workshops and presentations.

### **Increase Student Support Staff**

Before the pandemic, West Virginia was already facing a shortage of mental health workers. School districts should hire more teachers, counselors, and nurses to help address the academic, social, and mental health needs of students — both longstanding needs and those specific to the pandemic. Additional social workers, school psychologists, and counselors will be needed to help find students who were “lost” during the pandemic year, such as students who never logged into remote classes even though they were technically enrolled in the school. These students need to be located both to ensure their safety and to begin the necessary processes to reengage them in their schooling.

### **Improve Educational Achievement by Addressing Systemic Racism**

For additional staffing to improve the academic outcomes of Black students, faculty and staff must be trained to use established best practices for creating culturally responsive classrooms.<sup>37</sup> ARPA funding could be set aside to support these trainings for both new and longer-serving staff. This style of teaching includes a thorough understanding of curriculum combined with a respectful understanding of diverse students. This would include rejecting deficit teaching models, which rely on the premise that underrepresented students reside in unfit homes and communities and that these students must simply work harder to succeed in schools.<sup>38</sup> Teachers in culturally responsive classrooms respect and incorporate students' cultural and home experiences into the classroom.

### **Expand Summer Programs and Extended Day Options**

Supporting summer programs and extended day options could also prove to be an effective use of the funds if those programs are created using research-based information. Students need more individualized support to master new skills and knowledge. Group settings do not always allow students the opportunity to ask questions or to practice for mastery. An extended day program would allow students to complete homework or remediation with guidance from a trained tutor or a teacher. These programs should be created with equitable access in mind. Transportation should be provided for enrichment that takes place outside of traditional school hours.

### **Engage in Local Collaboration to Provide Wraparound Services**

Counties should collaborate with local agencies and organizations to provide wraparound services that include academic supports such as tutoring in locations closer to students' housing like libraries or community centers. ARPA funding can also be used to provide trauma-informed care, mental health support, and social-emotional support.<sup>39</sup> School boards and school leaders should recognize the difficulty that some students who endured pandemic-based hardship and trauma may experience in returning to school. Special consideration should be paid to students with disabilities, children experiencing poverty and housing instability, and English Learner students. These students may experience unique difficulties in adjusting to the classroom setting and they should be supported in their adjustment. Schools could invest funds to ensure that teachers and counselors are trained in the best practices to support these students without alienating them from their classrooms.

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36 West Virginia Department of Education, West Virginia ARP ESSER Fact Sheet, downloaded from <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/press-releases/arp-esser-wv-plan.pdf>.

37 The Education Alliance, Brown University, Culturally Responsive Teaching, downloaded from <https://www.brown.edu/academics/education-alliance/teaching-diverse-learners/strategies-0/culturally-responsive-teaching-0>.

38 Janice D. Lombardi, “The Deficit Model is Harming Your Students,” *Edutopia*, June 14, 2016.

39 School House Connection, “Overview of U.S. Department of Education Guidance on American Rescue Plan Act Homeless Children and Youth Funding” (July 2021).

## Support Student's Home Lives

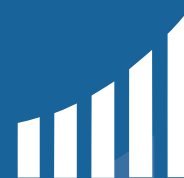
Counties should also coordinate with other state-level agencies to collaborate on how these agencies can use their ARPA funding to support students' home lives. The following services could be provided:

- Technological devices for children experiencing homelessness to ensure that they are able to fully participate in school activities
- Access to reliable, high-speed internet for students through the purchase of internet-connected devices/equipment, mobile hotspots, wireless service plans, or installation of Community Wi-Fi Hotspots, especially in underserved communities (e.g., at homeless shelters)
- Additional pay for teachers who provide one-on-one academic support to their students
- Ongoing training for teachers in new methods and strategies for closing the opportunity gap
- Incentives for students to participate in extended day learning
- School- or community-based academic opportunities to supplement field trip opportunities

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